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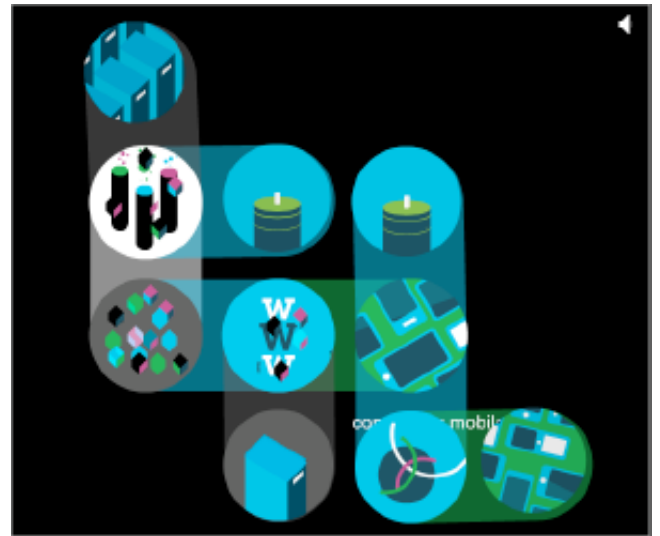
Office suites in the cloud: Microsoft Office Web Apps versus Google Docs and Zoho

By [Neil McAllister](#)

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A spreadsheet in your [browser](#) ^[1]? A word processor on the Web? These days, [SaaS](#) ^[2] (software as a service) is all the rage, and the success of Web-based upstarts like Salesforce.com has sent vendors searching for ever more categories of software to bring online. If you believe Google, virtually all software will be Web-based soon -- and as if to prove it, Google now offers a complete suite of office productivity applications that run in your browser.

Google isn't the only one. A number of competitors are readying Web-based office suites of their own -- most prominently Zoho, but even Microsoft is getting in on the act. In addition to the typical features of desktop productivity suites, each offering promises greater integration with the Web, including collaboration and publishing features not available with traditional apps.

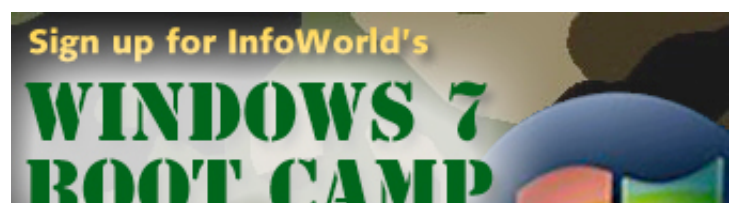


[Looking for a way to benchmark Windows 7 versus Vista or XP? Check out [OfficeBench Z](#) ^[3], a cross-version test script that uses your existing installation of Microsoft Office to evaluate your PC's performance. I Read InfoWorld's [first look at Microsoft Office 2010](#) ^[4].]

But how serious are they? Even with today's modern browsers, can browser-based apps truly substitute for [Microsoft Office](#) ^[5] for real-world work? I decided to find out. Armed with a selection of demo documents and actual work from my own files, I put Google Docs, Zoho, and the Technical Preview version of Microsoft's Office Web Apps to the test. Predictably, the results were mostly a disappointment -- but my experience yielded unexpected surprises, as well.

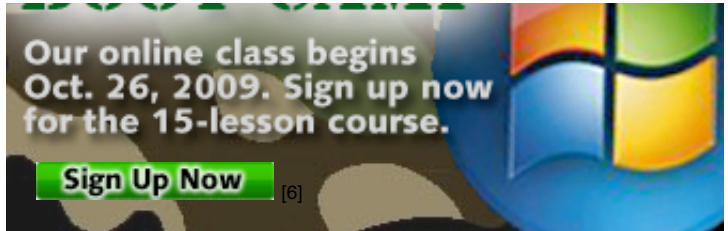
Google Docs: Your desktop, online

No company is more jazzed about Web-based applications than Google, so you'd expect its suite to be the best, right? Wrong. In fact, the most amazing thing about Google Docs turned out to be just how woefully inadequate for



serious work it actually is.

When you log in to Google Docs, you're greeted with a familiar, Google-style UI: spare, reserved, understated, even elegant. But while this trademark approach works wonders for Google's search products, with Google Docs it belies a paucity of features that's instantly frustrating.



[If the table and screen images in this article don't display properly, read them in the [original story at InfoWorld.com](#) [7].]

Web-based office suites at a glance

	Google Docs	Microsoft Office Web Apps	Zoho Writer, Sheet, Show
Cost	Free; \$50 per user per year with Google Apps Premier Edition	Will be available free via Windows Live, at a cost TBD as a SharePoint-based service from Microsoft Online Services, and as part of Office 2010 volume license purchases	Free for 1GB; \$3 per user per month for 5GB with Zoho Docs; other business subscriptions available
Web browsers supported	Google Chrome, Firefox 2+, Internet Explorer 6+, and Safari 3+ with some exceptions (more info [8])	Firefox 3.5+, Internet Explorer 7+, and Safari 4+	Firefox 2+ and Internet Explorer 6+ (more info [9])
Pros	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spare and easy to use UI • Presents chronological view of documents • Maintains version history of each document • Can import documents via e-mail or the Web • Docs are easy to embed in blogs and Web sites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Same ribbon bar UI we all know • Reproduces Word and PowerPoint files, and embedded graphs in Excel, with absolute fidelity • Excel Web App displays updates to multiple authors in real time • Printing is flawless 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides a few advanced features such as mail merge, pivot tables, and charts • Beta VB Macro support for spreadsheets • Can insert HTML and CSS directly from Web pages • Blog posting via MetaWebLog and Blogger APIs • Complemented by a wide range of business apps

Cons

- Almost completely lacking in advanced features
- Fails to preserve all but the most rudimentary Word, Excel, and PowerPoint formatting
- Printing is unreliable
- Word and PowerPoint Web Apps are read-only in the Technical Preview
- Excel Web App cannot edit files containing VBA, shapes, and other objects
- UI is inconsistent across apps
- Light on sophisticated features
- Preservation of imported Office documents only slightly better than Google Docs
- Printing is unreliable

Just for starters, forget about a smooth migration away from Microsoft Office. Google added support for Office 2007 file formats in June, but so what? Even with the older Office formats, Docs chokes on all but the most rudimentary formatting. I tried importing various real-world files from my archives -- not mock-ups or demos, but actual work -- and anything more complicated than a simple column of text came up distorted.

A demo file created in Word 2007 revealed just how many features Docs gets wrong. Tab stops, paragraph spacing, page margins, and placed images all move around indiscriminately. Curly quotes import properly, but that's actually a minus because there's no way to type them in Docs. Revisions made using Word's Track Changes feature appear all jumbled together as plain text; ditto for Comments. Page headers and footers are converted to inline text at the top of the document -- no surprise, because Docs doesn't even preserve pagination. Macros? Auto-update fields? Dream on.

The same goes for Excel files. Basic figures and formulas import properly -- which would be great if you were migrating from Lotus 1-2-3 -- but don't expect much else. Images are discarded, along with any formatting beyond simple cell sizing and shading. Charts embedded in Excel 2007 appear as big, white boxes labeled "No Data." Charts embedded in Excel 2003 or earlier simply disappear. It's often possible to tweak the Excel 2007 charts by hand so that they draw from the right columns, but even then, Docs' graphing engine is mostly a toy. There's no support for features like trend lines, no formatting options, and the output is hardly presentation-ready.

With PowerPoint files, Docs does an adequate job of preserving the basic look and feel of presentations, but again, it's a poor substitute for the original. Graphics appear blurry and re-sampled, text moves around without warning, and animations and transitions are eliminated. And here, Google doesn't bother making a pretense of supporting PowerPoint 2007.

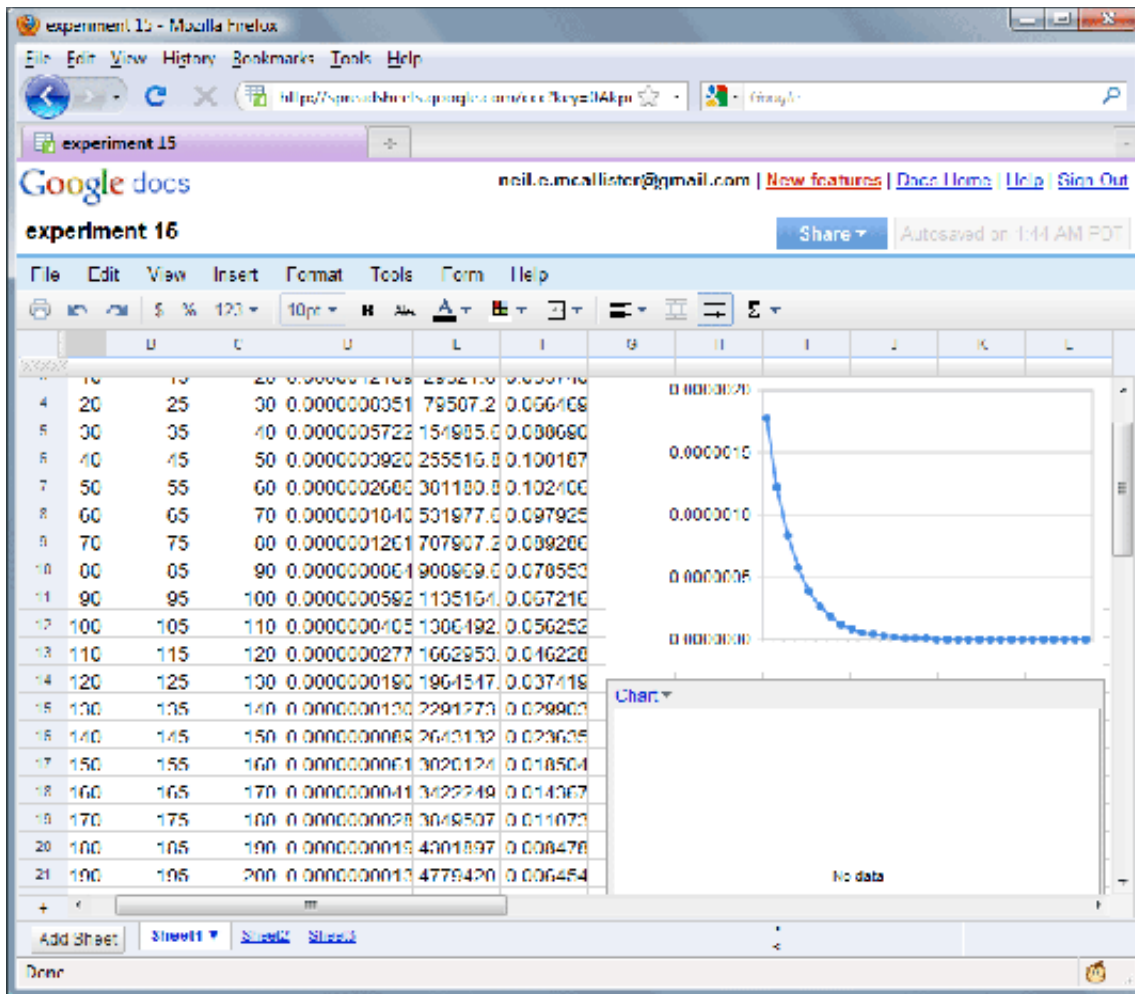
Despite its faults, Docs does incorporate some intriguing, even revolutionary ideas. If the goal was simply to mimic the current office paradigm on the Web, Docs would be a miserable failure, but Google is looking at the bigger picture. If outside-the-box thinking excites you, you may want to give it a try.

For example, in keeping with Google's idea of working in "the cloud," Docs discards the usual files-and-folders desktop metaphor. Instead, it presents your documents in a chronological view

Rather than simply re-creating desktop apps in the browser, Docs is Web-centric. You can import documents via e-mail or from the Web, or embed them in blogs or Web sites to share with the public. There's a UI for embedding YouTube videos in your presentations. There's basic version control to allow multiple authors to work on the same document. Forget paper; with Google Docs, it's all about sharing, collaboration, and online publishing.



A demo file created in Word 2007 (above) reveals just how many features Google Docs gets wrong. Charts embedded in Excel 2007 (below) appear as big, white boxes labeled "No Data." (Note: Click the images to enlarge them.)



[12]

But most of us in the real world have given up on the "paperless office," and once your feet land back on the ground, Docs disappoints once again. In keeping with its Spartan feature set, printing is thoroughly mediocre. As already noted, Docs seldom gets pagination right, particularly where images come into play, and it thinks nothing of breaking a page midtable. Fonts that render correctly onscreen might not print, and graphics come out blurry and jaggy.

Joel Spolsky once wrote that the problem with lightweight office suites [13] is that 80 percent of users need only 20 percent of the features of Microsoft Office, but it's a different 20 percent every time. Google Docs doesn't give you all of the features of Office and it doesn't try to. Unfortunately, in its present state it's missing so much that it's sure to lack something for just about everybody.

Zoho: A SaaS back office for small business

Zoho offers a slightly different take. While Google Docs presents a Spartan UI that emphasizes the online aspect of the suite, Zoho makes more of an effort to mimic the look and feel of traditional desktop applications. The results might seem more familiar to new users, but they also underscore the limitations of this strategy.

One problem is that Zoho's offering seems to have grown rapidly, with little thought to consistency. One application's menu might resemble a panel of buttons, while the next looks like tabs, and a third favors a drop-down layout. Icons and menus move around the toolbars from

one app to the next. The spreadsheet's interface offers a choice of colored themes, but the other applications do not. A pull-down menu makes moving between applications simple enough, but the lack of a common UI undermines the illusion that this is an integrated suite.

Zoho has a few features that Google Docs lacks, but most are minor. For example, Google's word processor offers a robust equation editor based on the TeX language, but Zoho's equation editor ^[14] is better. Zoho's thesaurus gives the part of speech for synonyms, while Google's does not. And Zoho allows you to insert HTML and CSS directly from files on the Web, rather than simply editing it in your browser as Google Docs allows you to do.

Like Google Docs, Zoho encourages Web-based publishing and collaboration. Here, Zoho's minor advantages include the ability to post to blogs directly using the MetaWebLog or Blogger APIs, the ability to generate a "doc roll" of recent documents for embedding in a Web site, and integration with EchoSign for digital signatures.

Zoho is slowly implementing more advanced features, too. Its spreadsheet offers rudimentary support for pivot tables and charts, while the word processor features a very basic mail-merge facility. Most remarkable, however, is the spreadsheet's elementary support for Visual Basic macros ^[15]. I have to confess that when I saw some of my macros running automatically in the browser, I was stunned; still, other scripts failed with error messages.

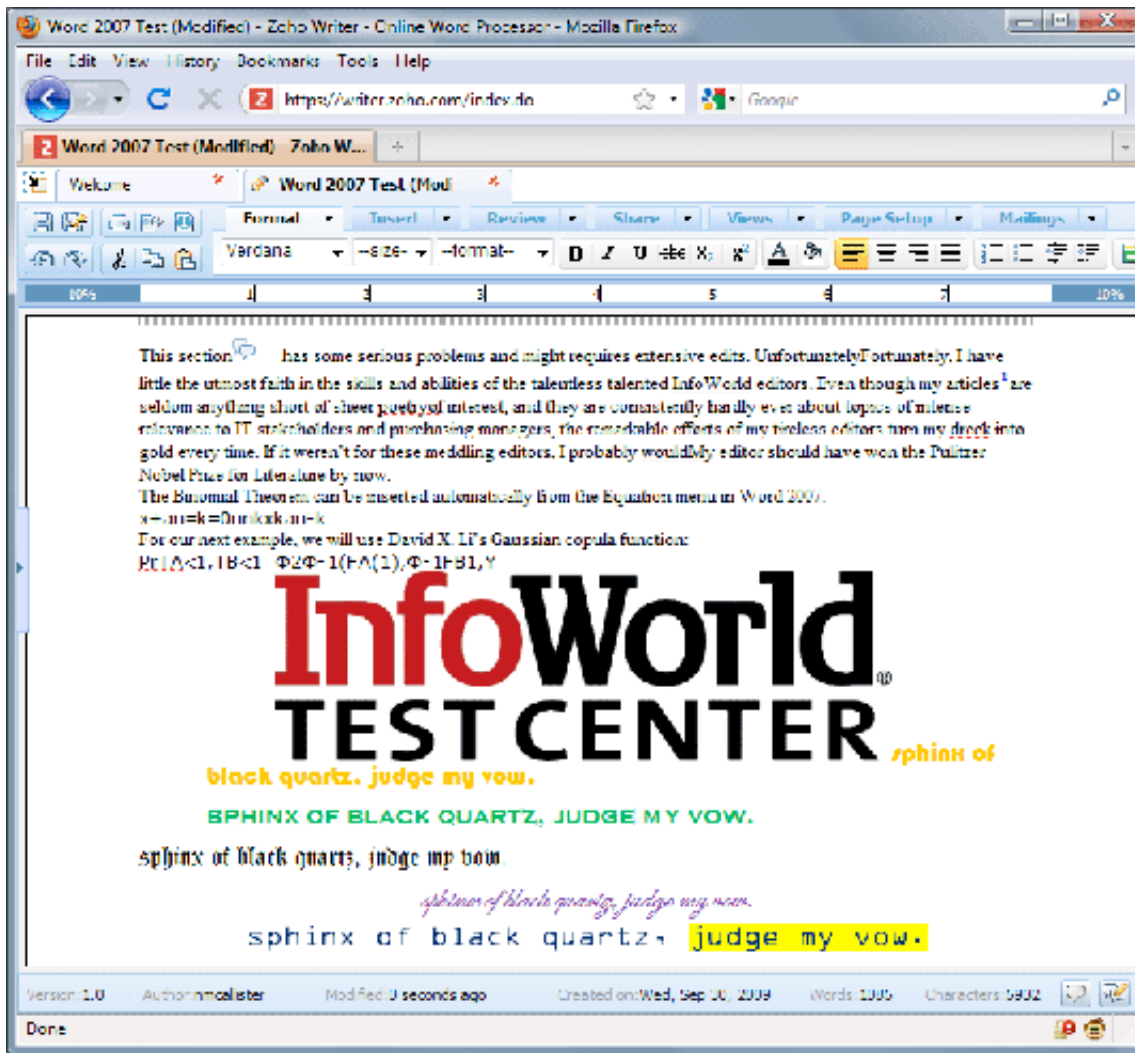
All of these strengths aside, however, the overall problems with Zoho's applications are similar to those of Google Docs. While the suite is amazing as a Web-based curiosity and passable as a lightweight set of productivity applications, power users will be dismayed by its lack of sophisticated features and its halfhearted implementations of existing ones.

Zoho's support for Microsoft Office file formats is better than that of Google Docs, but only slightly. Page layout and image placement in the word processor are questionable, and revisions made using Track Changes get corrupted, just as in Google Docs. Support for Excel 2007 embedded graphs is a bit better than Google's, but the output is similarly disappointing. Imported presentations are reduced to static slideshows, losing their animated transitions. And as with Google Docs, printing is unreliable, particularly where fonts and images are concerned.

The beta status of Zoho's applications might also be an issue for some. I'd hardly call Google Docs bulletproof, but Zoho did seem to freeze up the browser more often (though a page reload would usually solve the problem).

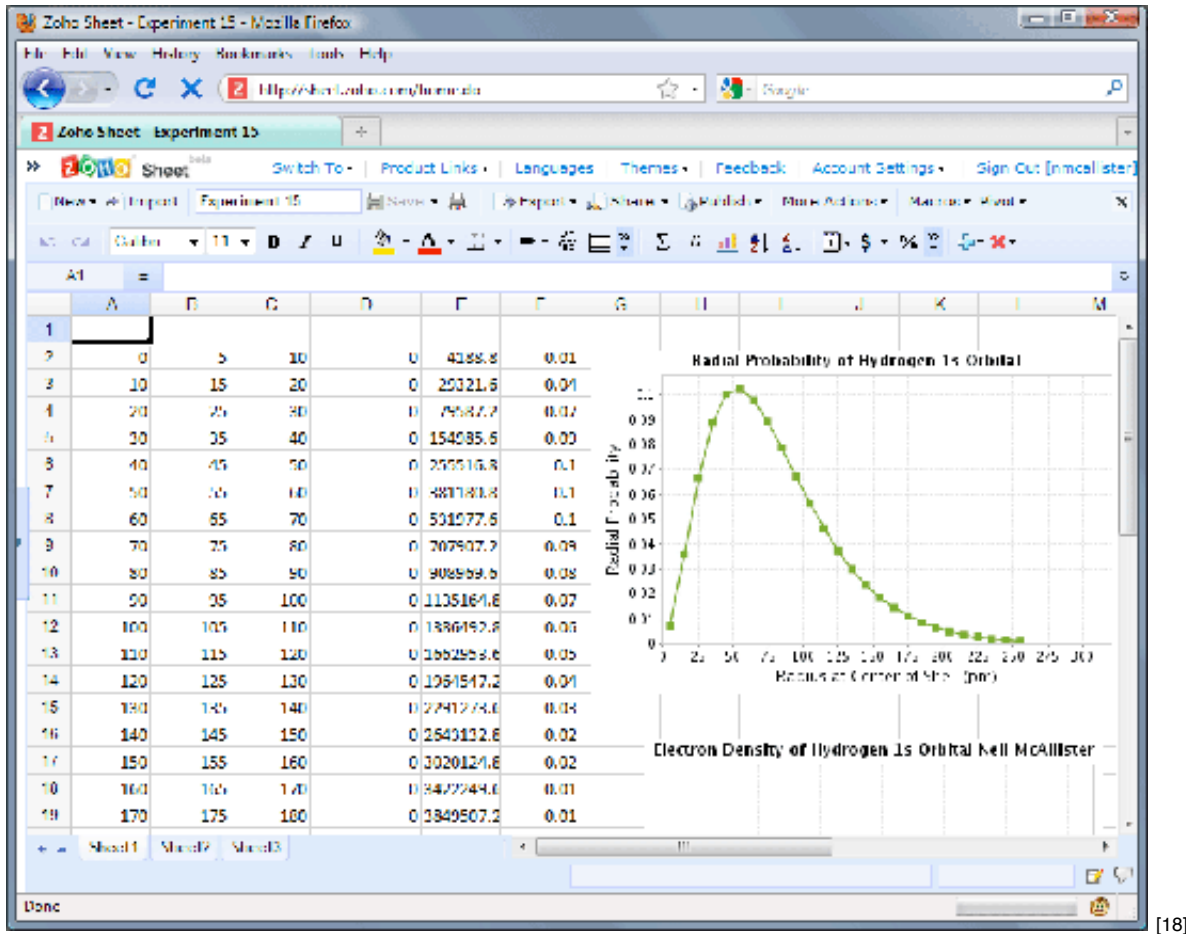
Zoho's real strength lies not in the merits of its individual applications, however, but in its offering as a whole. In addition to its productivity suite, Zoho offers a whole range of back-office business applications, including groupware, conferencing, invoice management, project management, CRM, and more. Most are free for limited use with a modest amount of storage space; for increased capacity and a greater number of users, Zoho charges a per-head subscription fee ^[16].

As such, Zoho could appeal to small businesses who like the idea of a suite of a la carte business applications that don't require a dedicated IT staff to install and maintain. Although it seems unlikely that Zoho's online productivity apps will meet your needs as well as desktop software would, if the SaaS way of doing things is attractive to you, Zoho could be a cost-effective option that provides a wide range of business functionality with a minimum of hassle.



[17]

Zoho's support for Microsoft Office file formats (above) and Excel 2007 embedded graphs (below) is better than that of Google Docs, but only slightly. (Note: Click the images to enlarge them.)



[18]

Microsoft Office Web Apps: Office, everywhere

Although Google Docs and Zoho are both flawed, Microsoft could hardly have expected to take this competition lying down. The Redmond-based giant is currently in the process of readying a fully Web-based version of its Office productivity suite, due to launch simultaneously with the release of Office 2010 [19]. While the Office Web Apps are currently only available as a Technical Preview (with a formal beta program to be announced later this year), they're already shaping up to become a formidable challenge to Zoho and Google Docs.

Nowhere is this more evident than when you import your first document into Word Web App. Unlike its competitors, Microsoft's online suite reproduces .doc and .docx files with absolute fidelity, down to the smallest detail. The results are jaw-dropping. Fonts, page spacing, headers, footers, auto-text entries, footnotes -- everything appears exactly as it does in the desktop version of Word. Images show up where they should, even when placed above or behind text. Documents that mix page sizes, or that alternate portrait and landscape modes from page to page, load correctly. And, most miraculous of all after experiencing the competition, printing is flawless.

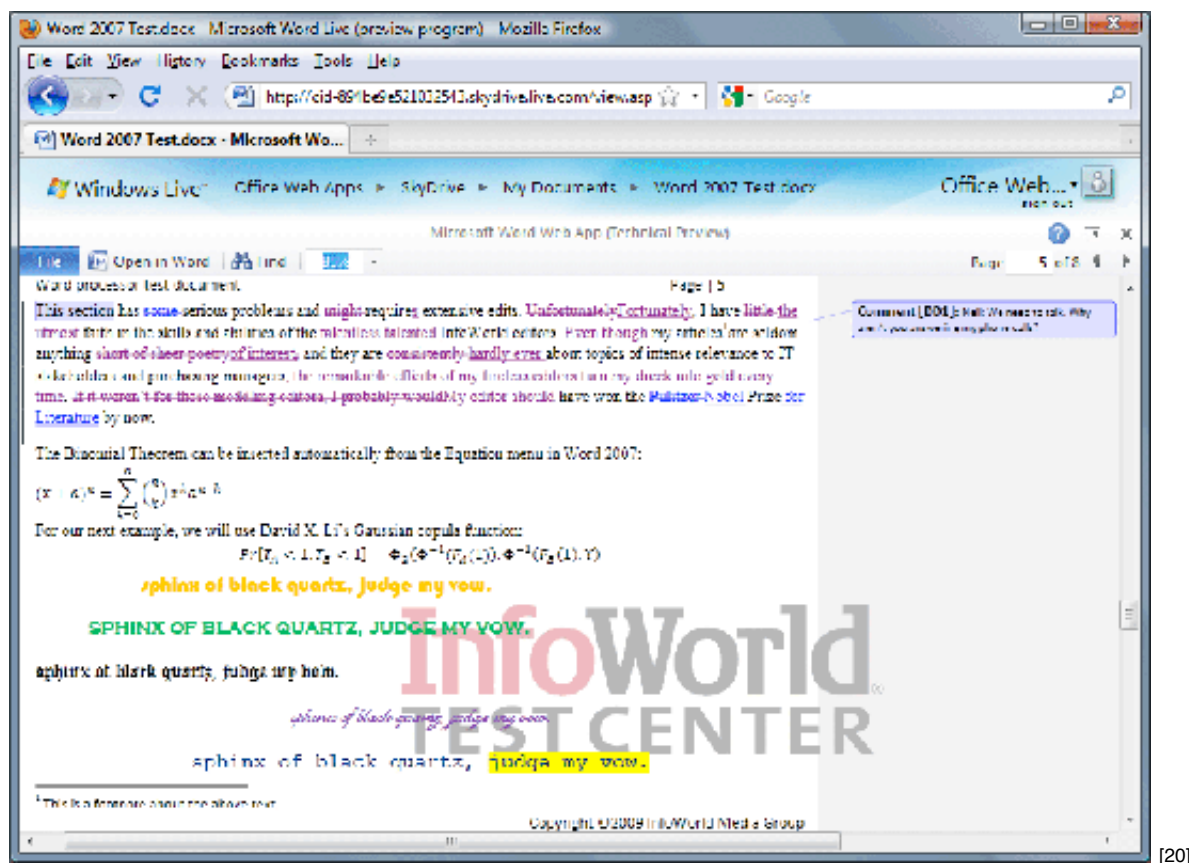
The PowerPoint files I tried yielded similarly impressive results. Images retained most of their quality, and text remained where it should. And unlike Google Docs or Zoho, the PowerPoint Web App managed to preserve animated transitions between slides.

You'd be forgiven for assuming that Microsoft relies on ActiveX controls or other IE-only trickery

to achieve all this, but you'd be wrong. Internet Explorer users are offered an improved file upload UI, but other than that, everything renders the same in all of Microsoft's supported browsers, which includes not just IE 7+ but Firefox 3.5+ and Safari 4+, as well. Just for fun I tried Google Chrome, too, and even though that browser isn't formally supported, everything looked fine. That's it; no add-ons or plug-ins are required -- but if you do install Silverlight, fonts look crisper and document load times improve somewhat.

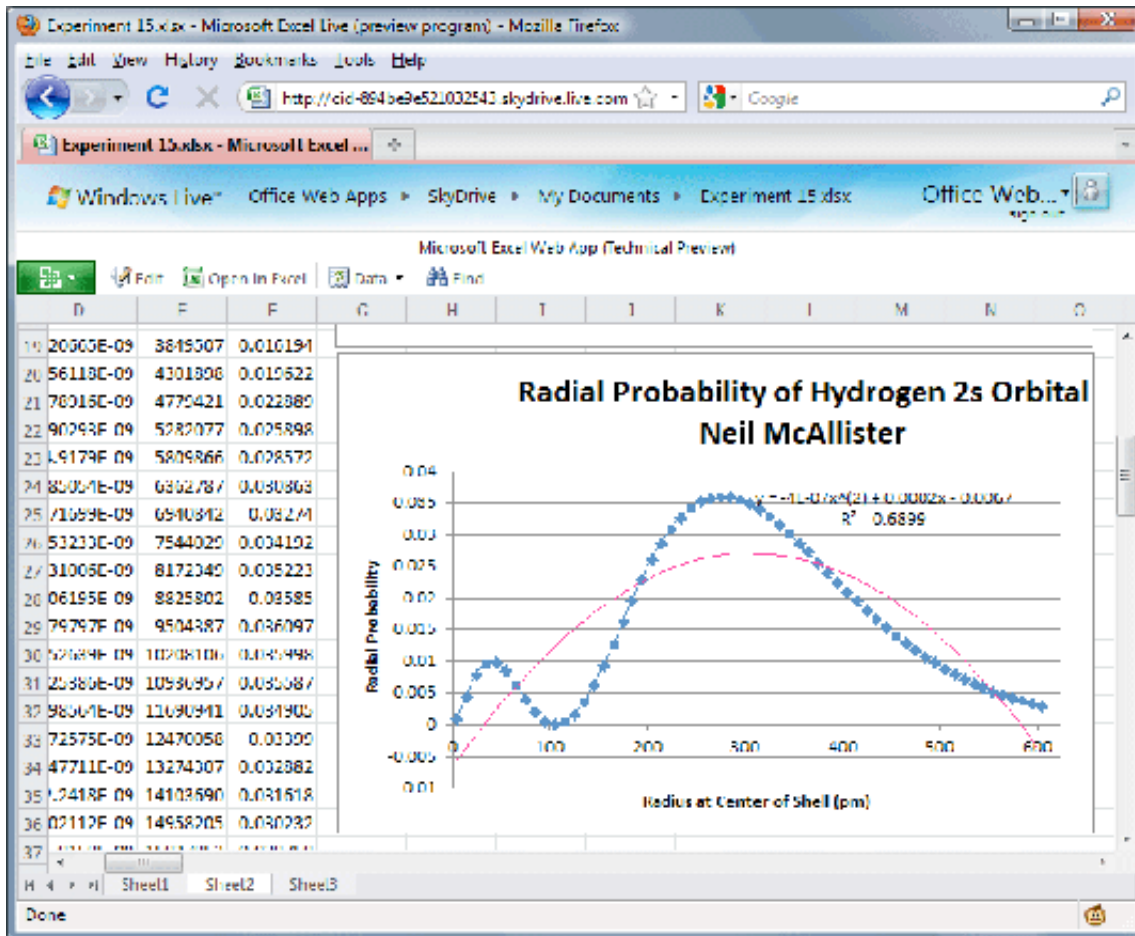
But there must be a catch, right? Sure, and it's a doozy: Microsoft's applications don't really work. During the Technical Preview, documents imported into the online versions of Word and PowerPoint are read-only. Mind you, that's nothing to sneeze at; if you're looking for a surefire way to read and print Word 2007 documents from Linux, for example, these apps are already a godsend. But whether Microsoft can re-create the editing experience of its desktop apps remains to be seen.

The Excel Web app *does* allow editing, and the results are mixed. Like its siblings, it reproduced Excel files with far greater fidelity than either Google Docs or Zoho. This was especially true for embedded graphs, which rendered exactly as they do in Excel 2007, down to the fonts and coloring. Changing figures on the worksheet caused the graphs to be redrawn in real time, which was impressive to watch.



[20]

Microsoft's Word Web App (above) reproduces .doc and .docx files with absolute fidelity, down to the smallest detail. Excel Web App (below) also was impressive, but the results were more mixed. (Note: Click the images to enlarge them.)



[21]

Equally impressive were the app's collaboration capabilities. Multiple authors can open the same document simultaneously, and when one author makes changes, all the other browser windows are updated with the new figures in real time. (It's worth noting, however, that Microsoft says a similar capability will *not* be available in the Word Web app at launch time; apparently there are limits to Microsoft's AJAX approach.)

Notably absent was any kind of revision history like what Google Docs and Zoho offer. It was fairly trivial to corrupt an entire worksheet with a few clicks of the mouse, and given that the document saves itself automatically at regular intervals, the Revert to Saved button wasn't much comfort. Hopefully this situation will improve as the suite matures.

More troubling were the features the suite didn't support. While the other suites generally discarded elements of spreadsheets they couldn't parse, Excel Web App warned me that files containing "VBA, shapes, or other objects" might not import properly. Worse, when such files did load, the presence of such objects meant they couldn't be edited. It seems the complex Office file formats can be a bit much for online applications to handle -- even for Microsoft itself.

The final version of the Office Web Apps will also include a Web-based version of OneNote, but that application isn't part of the Technical Preview and wasn't available to demo.

Microsoft plans to offer several versions of its Web-based Office at launch. The consumer version will be ad-supported and offer similar Web-publishing features as its competitors

(including the ability to embed Word documents in Web pages, formatting and all). Microsoft will also offer a hosted subscription version for businesses, with improved document management and workflow features. Customers who prefer to run the suite on their own servers will be able to do so if they buy a volume license to Office 2010.

That last option underlines Microsoft's view of Office Web Apps as a companion to the traditional desktop suite, not a substitute. Promised integration between Office Web Apps and Office 2010 will allow Office 2010 users to save documents to the Web and open them from the Web directly.

I didn't manage to get Office Web Apps working with the Technical Preview of Office 2010, but I did get it working with Office 2007 on Vista. I needed to be using Internet Explorer to make it work. I could click "Open in Word" in Word Web App and the document would download and open in Office 2007. From there I could make changes, and when I hit Ctrl-S the changes would be saved back to the document stored online. If I then reloaded the document in the Word Web App, I would see all the changes.

It's nothing more impressive than what you can do right now when you open a Word document from a networked share, but it shows how Microsoft is thinking about Office Web Apps and the desktop apps as a unified whole.

Why the Web?

When it came down to it, none of the three Web-based productivity suites I tried proved an adequate substitute for traditional desktop software. To be fair, all three are works in progress. But as someone who spends most of his day in Microsoft Office, I needed mere minutes to find some area where each of the online alternatives failed to live up to what I can already do on my desktop today.

So what do these three efforts, ambitious though they are, really hope to achieve? The answer may lie in the disparate business models of the three competitors and the separate niche that each hopes to carve for itself.

Google believes the Web is the future and it's inevitable that document creation, publishing, and collaboration will move online. If you agree with that vision, then an online productivity software offering from a company as prominent as Google will naturally be attractive to you. Just realize that Google's vision is also self-serving: Its core business is search, so it prefers your documents to be online, regardless of whether that's really an advantage.

Zoho's is more of a pure SaaS play, in which the whole may be more important than the quality of its parts. In other words, although Zoho's broad suite of Web-based apps may not give you everything you can get with desktop software, it might be enough. More important, its pricing structure and the fact that SaaS eliminates the need for in-house IT staff may be appealing enough to small businesses on tight budgets that they'll be willing to forgo some of the capabilities of more traditional applications.

Microsoft, on the other hand, is undoubtedly moving to the Web as a defensive measure, but its goal is not to replace the Office we have now. Rather, it plans to augment its current offering with an online option. In that sense, the Office Web Apps will probably fill much the same niche as Outlook Web Access: They'll be invaluable for mobile workers, but where possible, most will stick

with the desktop versions. In addition, by bringing support for the Microsoft Office file formats to the Web, Microsoft further cements its status as the de facto standard for office documents.

I suspect Microsoft's model will resonate best with most customers. Don't be surprised if you find yourself using Web-based productivity software in the near future; the online publishing and collaboration features are too valuable to ignore. At the same time, don't wipe your current office suite from your hard drive just yet. Although the current offerings are impressive, browser-based apps have a long way to go before they become the standard for business users.

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